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THE OLD LILAC TREE

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Sycamore Street, in the town of Fairfield, is out of tone today with the world's atmosphere; it has kept its air of peace, as it has kept its rough brick walks, its giant sycamore and tulip trees, and its great-girthed maples, and the iron fences overgrown with honeysuckles and trumpet vines. It belongs to the period when the little boys who played in its yards wore short round jackets and ruffled shirts with wide white collars, when little girls wore plaid dresses of red and black or blue and grey, and over them stiffly starched white aprons, when they wore their hair in tight plaits, and in the summer had wide-brimmed hats with streamers which were less often on their heads than hanging across their shoulders. It seems to belong still to the time when my little brother Benjy and I were children.

Benjy and I were always expecting something to happen on the street that would "make a story;" we were too young in those days when G. A. R. veterans like Uncle Ben were just beginning to be old men, to realize that Sycamore Street was old enough to have had already all the experiences a street can have, and that its adventures must have come when people like Uncle Ben and old people like the Misses Dane, across the street from us, were young.

The street crosses Fairfield from the Court-House to the edge of the bluff above the Ohio River, whence we gazed as children at the green Kentucky hills. Except for church and school, and Uncle Ben's house, that street was the whole of our world. Only "Denmark," across the street, where Miss Mary Ann and Miss Elizabeth Dane lived, was larger than our own house. Ours was shabby, however, and unpretentious, and "Denmark" seemed a palace to us. Its yard was half the block on that side of the street; it had wide stone steps where hydrangeas grew in tubs, and it boasted towers and bay windows and a gambrel roof. It was the only yard in the neighborhood where we never ventured in our games of "Hide and Seek"; although Benjy and I, at eleven and twelve, remembered a summer when the Misses Dane's niece from Boston had visited them, when we had played there day after day. A summer of enchantment, it had been — she and our brother Dick had acted fairy tales, and Benjy and I had been allowed to play pages and messengers, or fairies and dwarfs. Nan Whitney, her name was, and her eyes were black, and her hair, and she had thin long legs and smooth brown arms and hands and cheeks. Benjy and I would have died for her, but the grownups failed to share our enthusiasm. Grandmother said she was a hoyden, and her skirts were too short for a girl of fifteen; Mother couldn't see what Dick saw in her, and even Uncle Ben couldn't let us mention her name without shaking his head, warningly. Nan had never come back after that summer, so that when Benjy and I were eleven and twelve, we could hardly remember what Denmark was like behind its iron gate.

Our own house, with its yard full of snowball bushes, and roses and syringas, was really large enough for us. It was a long narrow house, which extended from the porch, six feet or so behind the gate, to a series of sheds that reached the alley fence. There was a front hall, with its winding, carpeted, unused staircase, and a parlor and

"sitting room," on the same level as the porch. "Sitting room" was an ironic term, because it, like the parlor, was furnished with flowered upholstered chairs, with murky, gilt-framed mirrors, and with horsehair sofas surmounted by carved walnut roses that hurt the back of your head when you leaned against them. From these rooms, three steps led to the back hall; to the battered backstairs, at the head of which was our playroom, and the bedrooms; and to the "library," which was in reality the family living room. Three more steps from the hall led to the kitchen, black Lelia's domain, and three from the library led to the dark wainscoted dining room. Beyond, on this lowest level, were the laundry and the sheds where "Mis' Mason," — the only negress in town, for some obscure reason, to be honored with "Mrs." — was kept busy over the washtubs or the ironing board throughout the week, and where her husband Jonah kept his gardening tools and the snow shovel.

Ours was a large family: our grandmother lived with us, and there were Father and Mother and seven of us, from Dick, the oldest, down to Benjy and me. The four brothers and sisters who came between counted for little in the lives of us two youngest, but Dick was our hero of heroes. He was Jason and Perseus and Theseus rolled into one, and Galahad and Gareth and Lancelot. In those days when Benjy and I discovered "The Wonder Book," and the stories of the Round Table, Dick was away at college, and that might have been the reason that we loved him so much. Even now, however, I cannot believe that absence lent enchantment to Dick as he was then: he stood very straight and tall, he was tanned and strong and lean, and his eyes were violet gray with black lashes and brows. Benjy and I never expressed to each other our feeling about Dick: it was something we understood without words, and we read him into every story that we pored over in our retreat under the library table.

The library was a big room lined with bookcases whose

glass doors reflected the firelight at night and the swaying trees in the side yard in the daytime. In one window stood a big globe that creaked when you turned it, and in the other Grandmother's table of ferns. Mother had a bas-relief of the head of Dante hung above the fireplace, which Benjy and I considered far more hideous than the white china head of Byron that Grandmother kept on the mantel-piece, and which Mother regarded with such disdain. The family sat, on winter afternoons and evenings, around an immense green baize-covered table which took up most of the floor space of the room; and it was under that table that Benjy and I found refuge with our books and games, — we read our fairy-tales and played there with rows of cardboard soldiers, in a perpetual dim twilight, where we were in concealment, forgotten by the grownups, and spared their nagging "You children! Always under foot — why don't you stay in the playroom?" We hated the lonely quietness of the playroom: in the library we knew the comfortable, safe feeling of having grownups around, and sometimes we heard interesting things —

Into the library there came, time and again, innumerable great-aunts and cousins, who visited us for longer or shorter times, or came in for dinner or supper. The only ones who didn't come were Grandmother's brother, our great-uncle Ben, and their old-maid sister, Aunt Hattie. The latter was so crippled with rheumatism that she must walk with crutches, and never left their cottage, except in the summer time, to sit in the yard beneath the maple trees. But there was no excuse for Uncle Ben's not coming: he had a truck garden, and sold his wares to housewives all over Fairfield, but he never drove his wagon down Sycamore Street. Benjy and I connected this foible of his with his stubbornness and bad temper — not that we should have dreamed that he was stubborn and bad-tempered, if Mother had not had a way of rebuking us with, "Harriet, you must control yourself —

do you want a temper like Uncle Ben's?" or "Benjy — you're getting to be as stubborn as your uncle." We were named Harriet and Benjamin for them, and were their favorites, as was orthodox; we were so petted and spoiled by them that Mother's reflections against Uncle Ben made no difference in our love for him. On every Sunday afternoon, winter and summer, we went down to their cottage at the end of Church Street to call, sometimes with other members of the family, sometimes alone.

The little cottage was completely hidden behind tremendous lilac bushes that became, every spring, a solid mass of flower. Benjy and I were convinced that there were no other such lilacs in the world, and we tried to persuade Jonah to let ours go untrimmed, in order that we might rival them. Everyone on our street, we told Uncle Ben, except the Danes, tried to grow lilacs like his, and none of them could — but perhaps the Danes could if they tried, because they had a real gardener. He had suddenly looked very angry when we said that — so angry that we were frightened, and with our eagerness for "making a story," we wondered, wildly, if it were his dislike for the Danes that kept him from Sycamore Street. After that, he would never talk to us about the lilacs, although he was eager enough to explain his success with melons and vegetables, and with hydrangeas and roses and peonies.

Benjy and I loved the little Church Street cottage: it seemed so full and crowded in contrast to our big, half-empty house. Its very smell was old-fashioned — musty, I should call it now, I suppose, — and it was overfull of massive furniture: mahogany desks and secretaries, and in Aunt Hattie's room, which was on the first floor on account of her rheumatism, a four-poster bed, and chests of drawers with glass knobs.

They were always ready and waiting for us on Sunday afternoons. When we had kissed them, Uncle Ben had his joke with me:

"And how air ye today, Harriet?"

"Oh — pretty well, Uncle Ben."

"H'm! Ye're *well* all right, but air ye sure ye're pretty?"

And his blue eyes twinkled so gaily, always, as though it were the first time I had been so teased.

We were taken to Aunt Hattie's room, then, to put our wraps on the four-poster bed; and afterwards returned to the "settin' room" to consult her barometer, which hung in the corner by the window. We were always genuinely anxious as to the morrow's weather. The barometer was a little thatched house with two doors, one for the gaily dressed maiden who swung out to announce fair weather, and one for the storm-coated little man who only ventured forth on rainy days. Sometimes we would ask Uncle Ben to tell us about the picture above the mantel, a steel engraving of Sherman's March Through Georgia — troopers tearing up a railroad track, against a lurid background of burning buildings. Uncle Ben had been on that march, but he never talked about the War very willingly, and most of what we knew we had learned from old bound volumes of *Harper's Weekly*.

Usually after we had been there a little while, Uncle Ben would take up his magazine wherein some chess problem was explained; he played chess every night all week long with Judge Brown, but Aunt Hattie wouldn't let him play on Sundays — he could only read about it. Aunt Hattie would tell us stories, or gossip about the townspeople, while we sucked peppermints which she gave us out of a crumpled little red and green striped paper bag. She had a magic gift for story telling, and we grew to know the hearts and minds of many of our neighbors better than they knew them themselves. She was the only person Benjy and I had ever listened to who could convince us that there was in real life any of the adventure and charm that we found in the books read as we lay on our stomachs beneath our library table.

In spite of the fact that Mother regarded him as a bad example, we had never questioned the perfection of Uncle Ben, any more than we had doubted the infallibility of Mother and Father, until an incident which occurred in the spring of the year when Benjy was eleven and I was twelve. We had been playing soldier with next-door Tom in the playroom — Benjy and I always played soldier feverishly through the last weeks of May, before Decoration Day. That day we boasted to Tom of our grandfather, who had been killed in the War, and of Uncle Ben who had been — glory of glories! — a captain.

"Aw!" said Tom, "I wouldn't be so stuck-up about it if I had an uncle who was captain of a nigger company!"

" 'Tain't so!" We were aghast.

" 'Tis. Ast somebody."

We dashed downstairs leaving Tom playing with the spurs which Uncle Ben had given us, to find Grandmother. Mother and Father, unfortunately, had already left for Boston for Dick's Commencement. Grandmother, when we asked her, nodded her head grimly.

"Don't ask me any more about it. It's the family disgrace."

It was a long while before Benjy and I could summon the courage to return to Tom and admit that he had been right. It was sad that Mother was not there, for when she returned she set aflame in our veins a fire of patriotism and a passion of loyalty for Uncle Ben by explaining what a service it had been to the country — and courageous, braving what he knew would be the contempt of his townsmen — to take that company of one hundred spiritless slaves and make them soldiers fighting for their own deliverance. (Apparently, Benjy and I decided in bewilderment, it had nothing to do with his condemned stubbornness.) And Dick had told us how the greatest hero of Boston was a soldier who had done just that. But when Grandmother admitted it, we saw it as a disgrace; Fairfield was near Kentucky, and when we pic-

tured Uncle Ben with his company, we saw, not a hundred like kindly old Jonah, but a company of those shuffling, stupid, brutal darkies who worked in the cigar factory, who reeked of raw tobacco, and who, marching to and from the factory four abreast, would never give one room to pass them on the sidewalk — one had always to go into the gutter, or be brushed there.

When Decoration Day came, Benjy and I concealed our grief, and went to the Court House with our usual overflowing baskets of flowers, to be made by the Ladies' Auxiliary into great bouquets for the marching veterans to carry to the cemetery in the afternoon parade. Spring had come late that year, so that we had instead of the usual roses and peonies and tiger lilies and wistaria, the earlier blooming lilacs and syringa and snowballs, and flowering branches from the locust trees.

Then, as always, Benjy and I, in the afternoon, went to the corner where the parade would pass — band, officers on horseback, and ragged lines of veterans. We had in our minds some foolish resolve to be as thrilled as ever at the passing of Uncle Ben — as though thrills ever responded to demand — and we stood silent on the curb, holding to each other and waiting. He had a horse, and rode straight as a ramrod, his shoulder straps gleaming in the sun, his sunburned cheeks rosy beneath his broad-brimmed hat. I looked at Benjy and he looked at me, laughing suddenly. Our grim resolves were superfluous, after all, for unaccountably the same old shiver went down my backbone, tears stood in my eyes, and I caught my breath sharply, as I had always done, when the flag went by.

Benjy said, on the way home, "It doesn't make any difference, does it, whether they were niggers or not?" And I agreed with him, so we practically settled the matter in Uncle Ben's favor even before Mother came home.

We went down to see him, as always, the next Sunday afternoon. To our surprise, although their yard had been stripped of every other flower, the branches of the

great lilac bushes behind the gate were dragged to the ground by the weight of the blooms. We voiced our reproach to Aunt Hattie as she took us into her bedroom. Uncle Ben was off sprinkling his garden.

"We didn't think any of Uncle Ben's flowers were too good for the *soldiers*!"

"They ain't good enough, those lilacs," she replied, shortly.

"Why — Aunt Hattie! They're the *loveliest* lilacs —"

"Oh, yes — but they're a sign of everlastin' hate —" Her sense of melodramatic effect almost carried her away, but she stopped there and shook her head solemnly.

We were bewildered, but dared ask no more. Afterwards, alone, we talked it over, and connected in various impossible ways the two mysteries about Uncle Ben — the lilacs, and his grudge against the Danes.

"Maybe," Ben sighed, "there is a story about him, if we only knew."

The rest of that Sunday afternoon we spent talking over the midsummer Carnival, given each year by the D. A. R. in the skating rink. These carnivals were to us as children the climax of the summer, as Christmas was of the winter. Mother had always had a leading part in the merrymaking: once it had been a "Trip Around the World," and she had been a Japanese, dressed in a kimono some cousin in the consular service had brought her, her black hair piled high in stiff coils, with long hair-pins that quivered and jumped about, her eyebrows penciled aslant. Again it had been a "Carnival of Authors," and she had been a heroine from some book of Thackeray's, in a full-skirted old green silk dress from an attic trunk, with black silk mitts and her hair powdered. There was always a band, and a Grand March, with the butcher, the baker and the candlestick maker and their wives as lords and ladies; there were unlimited drinks of pop and lemonade; there were confetti and paper streamers and feather ticklers: all the unsophisticated devices for hilarity.

This year, it seemed, there was to be a Carnival of Games, and the highest of honors had come to Uncle Ben. On the biggest night of the fair, he and Judge Brown were to play a match game of chess, with living chessmen. The floor would be marked off in squares, with the chessmen standing in their places, and Uncle Ben and the Judge, from opposite ends of the gallery, which ran all the way around the rink, would call off their moves. Benjy and I were tremendously impressed with this honor that had come to Uncle Ben, and we gloated as we thought of what a triumph over next-door-Tom it would be. Evidently the town had forgotten that he was a "nigger-lover." We talked of nothing else for weeks, and when Mother and Father finally came back from the East, it was the first thing we raced to tell them.

We had looked forward to Dick's graduation for a lifetime, it seemed to us — after it, he was to go into business with Father, and we should have him with us forever. But his being at home meant little, after all, for Nan Whitney came to Fairfield to visit the Misses Dane — for the first time since she had been Grandmother's "hoyden" — and Dick spent all his days at "Denmark." When Benjy and I heard that she had come, we wondered if she were much the same as she had been before, when we were such babies. We could hardly remember what she had been like, but she seemed different, although even more enchanting. She was very tall now, and slender, and her dresses of green dimity and pale blue lawn and polka-dotted white swiss, with their full sweeping skirts, her parasols and wide rose-wreathed hats, and above all, her soft, slurred speech, made her seem as lovely as a story-book Guinevere or Ariadne or Helen of Troy. We wondered whether she and Dick would begin again their friendship, interrupted when she had left Fairfield before — it would have happened so in any correctly written book. We felt indescribably cheated when we found that she and Dick had been friends through all the years when he had been so close to Boston at college.

It took very little discernment on the part of Benjy and myself to see Dick's state of mind about her. We scoffed loudly and often, as became our age and stage of development, but inwardly we plainly understood his feeling.

Nan was as nice to us as she had been before, and the gates of "Denmark" were opened to us again by her presence. We sat for hours, through the summer afternoons and evenings, leaning against the tubs of hydrangeas on the steps, listening while she and Dick, and what others of their friends came often to the wide porch, sang and played their mandolins. Mother always called us hours too soon. We never quite had time enough to decide whether Nan really cared for Judge Brown's son Ned, who was years older than the rest of them, and who, we knew, Drank — or whether she just pretended to like having him around to tease Dick. That Dick was teased successfully was quite obvious. Finally we decided, with much snickering, that she wanted to goad Dick into proposing, and that we needn't write the anonymous note we had considered, saying that he Drank.

Grandmother, we found, had forgiven Nan for having been a tomboy when she was younger, but Uncle Ben was implacable. Dick went to him for comfort in the matter of Ned Brown and received instead of consolation, warnings and "I-told-you-so's." Benjy and I decided, when we sometimes caught a word or two of his tirades, that he could never forgive Nan for being the great-niece of the Misses Dane. Mother, too, was not wholly sympathetic. We could not understand that, because Nan and she were good friends, until one evening when she and Father stopped in the library after supper to talk a minute. Benjy and I had been playing marbles under the table, and we picked them up and lay there quietly, because it was a game that was forbidden in the house.

"I don't like it, Richard," Mother said. "She will have so much more money than Dick can ever earn — it's a hard position for a man —"

"Nonsense. Nan will never be purse-proud. How

could she be, considering the way the Danes made their money in the first place? Old man Dane —”

“I know — smuggling contraband through to the Rebels! But they have lived it down —” Mother spoke bitterly.

“Oh, no — that’s a thing that can’t be lived down — until everyone who knows it is dead.”

Benjy and I pinched each other. So that was it! No wonder Uncle Ben hated them!

The next day was rainy and disagreeable, but in spite of it, we went to “Denmark” in the afternoon with Dick, and were taken into the solemn parlor, which with its massive stone fireplace and its dark rosewood piano, inlaid with mother-of-pearl, and the palms in the windows, and the countless ornaments set up in every possible corner, awed us almost speechless. While we were looking at a fat, red-velvet-covered album of Miss Mary Ann’s that Nan held in her lap, Ned Brown came in. Nan made him join us, and continued to turn over the thick yellow leaves, although he made no pretense of being interested. Dick was all attention, by way of contrast, so that it was to him she turned when she came to something that piqued her curiosity. It was a faded little daguerreotype of a bearded soldier in a forage cap. Uncle Ben! I knew, because Aunt Hattie had one like it. I was about to exclaim in wrath at its being there, when Nan said:

“Look, Dick — someone Aunt Mary Ann had a love affair with, I think — she left the room one day when I asked who it was, and Aunt Elizabeth wouldn’t tell me, either, only hinted at dire, mysterious things. I suppose he treated her abominably — as men will —” She smiled at Dick.

“Why,” Ned Brown said then, “don’t you know who it is? Father has one like it — it’s Dick’s Uncle Ben.”

I held my breath then, and Benjy was purple in the face, but she only laughed and said, “Really, Dick? I

must see that uncle of yours! Isn't it romantic! What do you suppose happened?"

Ned would have said something more then, but she put the album on the table and went to the piano. Benjy and I went home and talked over this latest discovery. We thought we knew the whole story now — Uncle Ben had been in love with Miss Mary Ann Dane, but had never married her because the Dane money had been paid for treason. But we couldn't bring the lilacs in anywhere.

While Nan was still, as we expressed it disgustedly, "fiddling with 'um both," the date of the carnival came. Benjy and I always had to go with Mother and Father, but once inside they let us loose, like dogs off a leash, if we promised to be at the door to meet them at ten-thirty. We always played then the game of losing and finding each other in the crowd, and it was by means of this game that we managed to be at their elbows when people we were interested in chanced to meet. First it was Uncle Ben, all dressed up in an eighteenth-century costume with ruffled shirt and powdered wig, on his way to his place in the gallery, who met Ned Brown at the foot of the stairs. Ned was drunk, undoubtedly. Benjy and I clutched each other excitedly: we had never really seen him in that state, although we had heard stories —

"Bet you," he said, snatching at the stair rail as he glared at Uncle Ben, "Bet you five dollars my father beats you in half an hour tonight —"

"Done," said Uncle Ben. "Meet me here with the five when the game is over."

"You, shir, meet me, shir, wi' five —" and Ned staggered up the stairs.

Although the game meant nothing to Benjy and me, hanging over the gallery railing to watch it, we felt that we must be the cynosure of all eyes and the envy of our friends, as the family of one of the principals. We liked, too, hearing the men call out, first from one side, then from the other; we were stirred by Uncle Ben's crisp, incisive tones — "like a General in command of legions,"

Benjy whispered to me — and we liked watching the grotesquely costumed chessmen move across and back —

Dick and Nan were there, one on each side, the White Knight and the Red Queen of "Through the Looking Glass." I thought they looked at each other across the heads between them, as though something had happened — as if, perhaps — perhaps — but Benjy said no, they were just excited by the game — "an' how can you tell *anyhow*, looking down on top of their heads, how they're lookin' at each other?"

Eventually the game was ended, and Uncle Ben had won. We had never doubted him, of course, and we jumped to our feet, and wriggled through the crowd to find him and tell him so. Quick as we were, however, Dick and Nan had raced up the stairs and reached him first. Uncle Ben had never seen Nan before he had had to use her as one of his queens in the game, and I could see that she had bewitched him.

"Maybe," I whispered to Benjy, "Miss Mary Ann looked like that once, and he can't help loving her."

He grunted, and pinched me to caution silence, lest we miss something they were saying.

"I'm proud to meet you." Nan took Uncle Ben's hand. "Dick and the children are always boasting about you."

He laughed shortly, evidently determined to persist in disliking her.

"Nothin' to boast about."

"Oh, they have told me great tales of your past — the War, and everything."

"The War!" He flushed. "Don't you know the War disgraced me because I commanded niggers?" His eyes were keen and cold as he watched the color flame in her cheeks and wrath in her eyes.

"That's what I meant —" She looked at him scornfully, as though he had shown himself weak in admitting his shame. "If you lived in Boston, now —"

He laughed then, and patted her hand, jerkily. I

thought he looked teary, but Benjy always said that because he was getting old his eyes looked misty that way sometimes.

"It doesn't matter, anyway, after all these years — it's time to let by-gones be by-gones," he said, and turned to us. "Come along with me, you young-uns — I've won a bet, and when I get it, I'll treat you to a lemonade apiece."

Ben and I looked at each other significantly, following them downstairs through the crowd.

"Won't need a 'nonymous letter," he whispered, behind his hand.

"It's all fixed up, already," I persisted.

Ned Brown was waiting for Uncle Ben at the foot of the stairs, and seemed not to see Dick and Nan.

"Here," he said, waving a bill, "here's you're five, you ol' nigger-lover!"

Then, just as Nan stopped short, blocking the staircase, he looked up and saw her.

"Oh — 'Evenin', Miss Whitney," and he held out his hand.

She pretended not to see him.

"Come on, Uncle Ben," and she slipped her hand in his arm, "let's have the lemonade — I'm dying of thirst!"

Triumph, then, like an aura, surrounded Dick and Uncle Ben, and, I am sure, Benjy and myself, as we trailed after them to the lemonade stand.

The carnival ended on Saturday night, and on the next Sunday afternoon Dick and Nan went with us down to Uncle Ben's. It was a hot midsummer day, heavy with the scent of the rank weeds growing in empty lots, of dusty sunflowers, and August lilies in front yard gardens; and there was no one stirring in the streets, not even a stray dog. It was with even greater surprise, therefore, that we came to Uncle Ben's gate and found him trimming the lilac bushes — those lilacs which had never been trimmed! He stopped when we came in long enough to mop his streaming forehead, and shake hands; then he

said that Aunt Hattie was waiting for us — to go on around and he'd be along when he was through.

We went around to the side yard, where Aunt Hattie sat beneath the maple trees, and Dick introduced Nan to her. The first thing Benjy and I wanted to know was why the lilacs were being trimmed.

"He ain't trimmin' them — he's cuttin' them down — an' it's high time, too, 'though he might have waited till tomorrow, what with th' neighbors an' all."

She shut her teeth in a way that meant no more questions, and sent us into the house for palm-leaf fans, "Kep' in the top drawer of the settin' room secretary." Benjy and I were too dumbfounded to indulge in surmise in the few seconds we were in the house alone; and when we returned with the fans, the two of them were telling Aunt Hattie about the carnival.

Suddenly Nan stopped what she was saying.

"There's Jenny!" Jenny was the Danes' maid. "What can she be wanting?"

She stopped at the gate, Uncle Ben pointed to us beneath the maples, and she came back swiftly as her weight allowed.

"Don' yo' be frightened, honey," she said to Nan, "it's the heat or sumpthin' — yo' po' Aunt Ma'y Ann's done had a stroke!"

The world seemed to stop still in its spinning and drop away from us. A stroke! One knew that such things happened, of course, — but in the middle of a peaceful Sunday afternoon like this! We were all on our feet at once, even Aunt Hattie on her crutches. Benjy and I raced to the gate after Dick and Nan, with Jenny behind us, puffing. Nan just paused at Uncle Ben's side.

"It's Aunt Mary Ann. Didn't you knew her once — or something? She's had a stroke —"

Uncle Ben dropped his axe. His face was mottled from the heat, and his veins stood out.

"A stroke?" he said, thickly. "If she comes to — if

she comes to, and remembers me, tell her I'm cuttin' the lilacs down —"

Nan was too intent on getting home to look surprised at the strange message — she promised to deliver it, and ran off up the street, Dick still at her heels. Uncle Ben took up his axe again and chopped fiercely, as though he were fighting time, and might be too late, — and the noise of the blows sounded like an army at the gates of a city, echoing as it did in the quiet street.

We could not stand being left any longer to draw our own conclusions about the lilacs and Miss Dane. We went back to Aunt Hattie, who was fanning herself back to a calmer state of mind; we planted ourselves crosslegged before her chair, and demanded the story. It gave her a chance to be dramatic that, shaken as she was, she had not the resolution to let go by.

"You mustn't ever let on to your Uncle that I told you," she said; then she coughed, and fanned with some agitation, and coughed again.

"It was just when the War broke out. Your uncle was sighin' away his nights and days for love o' Mary Ann Dane, an' screwin' up his courage to ask her, only to let it ooze out again. They hadn't no money to speak of then, the Danes hadn't, an' lived in the ol' White place on Church Street, — but she was proud, pert little thing, an' kep' him danglin' an' danglin'. Well, o' course, Ben 'listed — 2nd Ohio, he was in, when the War begun — it was the first o' May, an' the lilacs was in bloom when he had to go. His last night home, he went up to see her — one o' them warm, sweet, May nights it was — you know the kind — moonlight, with th' smell o' lilacs an' locust trees hangin' over everything, an' the grass dewy. Well, Ben come home early, all down in the mouth, an' told us about it. Just Mother an' me was here with him, then — your Gran'ma was married long before, an' gone. He told us he hadn't got up his courage to speak about marryin' him till she walked to the gate with him to say good-bye — an' when he did, she just laughed at him —

on a night like it was, moonlight an' all, she was cold-hearted enough to laugh.

"'Oh, Ben,' she said, 'I couldn't marry a common private. When you come back an officer, I'll think about it.'

"He turned away, then, but she called him back, an' broke off a big piece of lilac an' gave him — to remember her by, she said. Well, he'd brung the lilac home, an' put it in water, an' kep' lookin' at it, sad enough to break your heart. Next day, when he'd gone, Mother took the lilac an' cut off the flowers.

"'He sets such store by it, Hattie,' she said, 'I just think I'll take a slip an' see if it won't grow.'

"Mother was mighty handy with flowers, an' it did grow, — so when he come home on furlough in a year, she had a live lilac bush for him. He was pleased as a child, an' took it for a good sign for him an' Mary Ann. When evenin' come, he rushed right off up there to see her. He was an officer, then, you see, — they had offered to make him a captain if he would take a nigger company.

"'But Mary Ann's ideas had grown a lot that year — they'd got rich, you see — an' didn't seem to care that everybody knew how, or that ol' man Dane had been threatened more 'n once with a tarrin' an' featherin'. They had built the house on Sycamore Street, an' were livin' like royalty. Ben wouldn't hear nothin' said against Mary Ann, though, but run right off to see her.

"'She was on the porch when he got there, an' he was so glad to see her, he poured out a lot of poetry about the lilac that had taken root, an' was goin' to rush right up an' claim her, thinkin' his shoulder straps was all that he needed, you see. She rose up, then, as white an' hot as lightning, an' called him a renegade white man, an' said that no one who associated with niggers as their equals could set foot in her house. Ben was struck dumb at first — froze right up, he said; then when he could speak, it never occurred to him to taunt her with her father's treason. All he could think of was that lilac bush that Mother had planted for him.

" 'You'll never forget this night, an' the way you've treated me,' he said, 'an' neither will I — an' as long as I live an' as long as you live, that lilac will be growin' by my gate to remind you of it!' "

Aunt Hattie paused there, and sighed, then added:

"It seemed like Providence wanted what he said to come true, for there couldn't nothin' kill that lilac bush, an' it grew like Jack's beanstalk."

Benjy and I sat in silence for a long while, watching Uncle Ben chopping at the bush. Half of it was down, now, and the sun was getting rather low, and the shadows very long. It was hard to believe that Uncle Ben, who had seemed to live for his chess games, and for spoiling his nieces and nephews, had carried this awful tragedy concealed in his breast. We were too young to be skeptical about the intensity of emotions a generation old. Would Uncle Ben be forever afterwards crowned with a halo of tragedy in our sight? Poor Uncle Ben! He could not possibly live up to our idea of what a hero should be!

"Here's Dick back!" said Benjy suddenly.

We rushed to the gate to meet him, but Uncle Ben was there first, and opened it.

"Well?" he said.

"She's conscious."

"Kin she talk?"

"No. They told her you were cutting down the lilacs."

"Did they?"

This was Uncle Ben's opportunity — we waited, clutching each other, while he wiped his face, which was purplish from exertion, and dripping with perspiration. He was a very unheroic figure, in his shirt sleeves and gardening trousers and old elastic-sided slippers.

"If I was you, Dick," he said, finally, "I'd marry that girl tomorrow, an' be sure I got her."

That was all. Benjy and I were exasperated. After all, the only stories that ended on the right note were the ones we read lying on our stomachs under the library table.

TRUE LOVE

By EMA SUCKOW HUNTING

When Edna Mabin was two years old, her mother died of consumption. When Edna was twenty-two, Dr. Woolcot rapped with his knuckles all over her thin chest, listened, said, "Whisper 'thirty three'": checked certain places on her skin with a blue pencil, looked her straight in the eyes and said, "Tuberculosis. It's bugs, Edna, sure. You go out to Colorado and go to bed. I'll tell your father. You're not bad and you'll get well."

John Mabin had married again, but Edna's mother was his darling, and after her, Edna. His collapse at the news was so distressing that Woolcot wired ahead to a private sanatorium he knew of for accommodations, wrote a doctor friend in the Springs to look out for her, and sent Edna off in just four days time, alone and dazed. "But she was so full of life, such a picture of health," groaned her father. "Don't tell me it has got her too."

"Got her — nothing!" said Woolcot. "She has got it. And I tell you she'll get over it."

"No," the father whispered. "She'll go like her mother. It was born in her."

And, of course, this was the view of the neighbors.

"She had too much color. I always told you she'd go that way some day, like her mother. Nice girl, too — too bad."

"They say consumption ain't fatal these days. Huh! Don't tell me. I never see a cure yet. Mabin'll likely spend all he's got and then lose her."

"When's Carle going to be back? Lucky for him he found it out before he married her. She'll surely let him go, now. Went off without seeing him, didn't she?"

"Who examined her — Doc Woolcot? Funny thing he told her, right out like that. Used to be sweet on her himself, they say. Old Doc Brady never tells 'em.

What's the use, he says. Give 'em a tonic and make 'em feel good as long's they can. Well, poor girl — it's too bad."

"When you write to her," Woolcot said to John Mabin, "you be damn careful what you say. She'll get well, if we don't kill her among us. Treat her like a human being."

Two days after Edna left, Douglas Carle came back from a two weeks' concert trip with the college boys' Glee Club. He was bored, dusty, flattered, and bilious, and he made up his mind not to see Edna nor anybody else until he was darned good and ready. These trips were no lark for the director. He had seen enough Hoke College alumni to populate the globe. Where did they get all the sweet young things who were coming next year to study under him? Ye gods! Dinners, receptions, reunions: and the twenty youths of the Club had been twenty thorns in his exclusive and temperamental side. He was a fool to stick with this middle class, fresh water college anyhow. He was an artist: but other artists were so confoundedly promiscuous: and Hoke College was surprisingly enough a place where a gentleman could live like a gentleman.

And besides, he drew a salary of three thousand a year.

He shaved, bathed, shampooed his thick, reddish-brown hair, and dressed in garments mercifully not mussed by two weeks in and out of a suitcase. Then he strolled over to the campus and unlocked the door of his studio, intending to put in an hour at the piano before dinner. It was an early winter twilight. The three western windows were faintly reddened by the afterglow of the sunset, but the room lay shadowy and vague in the dusk, falling away into echoing corners, where, he smiled to think, perhaps the ghosts of all the melodies played for years in the room might be lurking, and the memory of all the slim young pupils who had come to him there.

Pretty girls came to Hoke College, studied music a few years, married happily, and forgot it. And him. He reached for the electric switch and snapped on the green-shaded light that stood on the piano. A circle of brilliance leaped out of the dusk: and in the centre of the circle, on the piano lid, lay a letter from Edna.

She had put it there herself the day after Allan Woolcot said, "Tuberculosis."

"I suppose I might have telephoned her," thought Carle, scowling at the envelope addressed "To Douglas" in her unmistakable hand. "Oh, well—I'll run over tonight." He lit a cigar, flung the match into the darkness, and sat down in the round of light to read the letter.

She wrote:

Dear—I shall be gone when you come back and find this letter and read it. I found you in this room, and I came here to say good-bye to you.

You remember telling me how thin I have been getting? And listless? And that troublesome cough? Did you know that my mother, my real mother, died of consumption when I was little? It was a pain between my shoulders that sent me to Dr. Woolcot. He says I am not very sick yet.

But even if I should live, I couldn't marry you. It wouldn't be right. You must go on with your music and your life. I am going without seeing you because I thought I could write it better. I am going in three days to a place where people like me are sent, but I won't tell you where because you might care enough to come to see me, and you might hope that I would get well some day. I never will, not to be like other people, and you must forget me. But I shall always hope that you will make your plans come true, and that you will be great and happy. If I had been well, perhaps I could have been your sweetheart always, and when I die, I will try to believe that I am. But this is good-bye, for always and ever. Good-bye, my dear, my dear.

In the envelope lay the key to the studio he had given her.

Then memories came out and assailed him: memories

of Edna, the slimmest, the most winsome, most talented and gay of his pupils. Her face grew against the darkness into which he looked, her face as he had seen it a year and a half before when she came for her first lesson. She had been round and soft, in the first charm of girlhood, with vivid coloring and a fluff of blond hair, and an eager, shy, imaginative soul that leaped out of her eyes to meet the world. Always when she came he was conscious of himself — of his drawl, his thick reddish hair, his temperament, his caressing and expressive voice: and after five minutes with her, he could not help regarding himself as a genius appreciated and adored by beauty. There came a day in the spring — an afternoon in mid-May when all the college love affairs were ripening and the campus paths were so many lovers' lanes paced and re-paced by lingering, wistful young feet — when she came into the studio with flaming cheeks and the barest word of greeting. Her emotion, had he known it, was not entirely for him. She had received and refused her first proposal of marriage the night before, no college boy's declaration, but a serious and disconcerting offer of himself from the reserved and difficult Dr. Woolcot. It had changed the world for her. It had changed her ideas of herself, and especially her ideas of Carle. She was no longer content to adore him as a genius Heaven-sent for her humble delight. She felt ashamed and jumpy as she entered his room. Carle, leaning back in his arm-chair while she played Grieg's "Butterfly" — all the pretty girls who came to study music played Grieg's "Butterfly" and he deeply and calmly despised it — felt the air about her grow electric with emotion. He fidgeted and bit a lip: then rose and tramped the room. The May air flowing through the windows was nectar. The voices of tennis players on distant courts reached him faintly through the music. Her fingers ran on and on, and the sun touching her fluff of blond hair transfigured her. He stopped beside her. Grieg's

"Butterfly" fluttered, poised an instant on frail wings, and dropped at their feet. He pulled her up beside him. "Edna," he muttered. "Edna — you wonderful, you shining thing." Her terror was delicious, more flattering than joy. She went white as her hand. Then suddenly the resistance ran out of her arm — he kissed her.

The weeks that followed were pure joy. She loved him with wonder and bliss, breathless, white and red by turns: and he felt her adoration and was happy. There was no talk of an early marriage to cloud their naive delight. "Sometime" — was all they said: but "now" was more entrancing. The entire college knew and savored the situation. He had never been so triumphantly the artist — he, at once too fastidious and too indolent to have dabbled much in the tender passion. His Commencement recital is still talked about by the music lovers. He surpassed himself. The next day he started for Europe for a summer of study and "atmosphere."

Carle, at this point in his reflections, re-lit his cigar and began tramping about the studio, in and out of the circle of light. He was recalling his home-coming in the fall.

He had remembered her as a flame of eager life. He found her big-eyed, awkward, and shy, trying to hide the thinness of her shoulders and arms with a puckery dress. Instead of a rapturous greeting, she clung to him and cried. And he had returned more fastidious than ever.

"It was this, of course, this disease fastening on her," he thought, scowling into the shadows of the studio. "It went over her like a fog, blotting out her sunshine." The fancy pleased him. Also he had had an uneasy feeling several times during the past year that if he had been more ardent — "But this explains it," he told himself, flipping his ash. "Poor Edna — poor little thing. She was slipping away even then." He was already thinking

of her as if she were dead. And suddenly the heartbreak of that doomed young girl, creeping into his studio to write her pitiful little letter, seemed to fill the room. "God — so young, so young," he muttered, and covered a white face with a shaking hand. One whole half of his brain was throbbing with pain, not for her alone, but for all the young, stricken things in the universe — the artist's pain, vague and poignant, seeking expression: but other thoughts were stirring in that other half of his brain, the half that kept him here in Hoke College, that made him indolent and fastidious. "She adored me, and she was beautiful and sweet: but as a wife? The wife of an artist should be a woman of the world, of experience. This is a mere phase of my career. Could I have taken her with me into the cities? If it had to be — if nothing could save her —"

And then a wrench of real emotion caught him. Edna, dying — alone, and longing for him — Edna, who had thrilled and paled in his arms! It is likely that if she had been the Edna of his first infatuation, soft and round, with eager, merry, adoring eyes, and arms that curved divinely into the young shoulders — a beautiful, shining thing — it is very likely that he would have left that night to find her. But he was fastidious: and she had really grown very thin. Her elbows were bony, and the vertebrae showed in knobs up the back of her neck. She was over-sensitive, too, and listless. Her spice and verve had gone. Not ugly — Edna never could be that, she was too small and delicate. But the wine of desire no longer flowed in her veins. She was appealing, but no longer compelling. And he sat down that night, with his piano for a desk, and wrote her a complete, final, and eloquent good-bye.

It was with this letter in his hand that he set off across the snowy campus some two hours later, to call at Henry Mabin's and leave the letter to be posted. He told himself that since it had been his Edna's wish, her last wish,

that he should not know the place of her exile, he would respect that wish. He had written as much in the letter. "Everything, darling, shall be as you have wished it. To have seen you once more — but you are right. It would have been too painful. This is better, braver. But my heart —" and so on, through many pages of impassioned renunciation. The campus was windswept and deserted. The paths, mainly unused during the holidays, were choked with snow. Carle — he had really forgotten dinner entirely — stumbled on through the darkness with every symptom of a broken-hearted man. His face was white and his eyes were dark with suffering. Sad and passionate music sounded in his ears, and the words of his letter fitted themselves into the bits of melody. Then he thought of the young girl as a white spirit out somewhere in the cold and desolate night. "But even if I should live —" she had written. No, no — Edna, once so warm and vivid, was dead, to him already dead. Poor child, poor dead little sweetheart! The pain settled into his heart once more, vague and poignant, not for her alone — for all the young, broken creatures of the world.

On a sleeping porch in the Springs, sweated and capped in her narrow white bed, Edna read the letter. Beside her on a small table were her ivory desk clock, a pitcher of water creaking with the cold, a paper sputum cup in a tin holder, and a book the nurse had brought her. She leaned back against a backrest and looked through the open end of her porch at the distant range, the mountains swimming, snowy and remote, in a haze of intense light. A racking cough in the next cubicle — a lighter, looser cough above her head — this was all she knew of her neighbors. She held her letter in her mittened fingers until the light changed, and the sunset, swift and grey, crept across the mountains, touched the town, and deepened in the frosty air about her. Two tears, half

frozen on her cheeks, she wiped away as a waitress switched on the light in her room and set her supper tray on the table. She crept in and ate her supper, in pyjamas and bathrobe, and afterwards sat for a while in a hard wicker chair that creaked as she rocked. There was music in the place somewhere, a Victrola, and afterwards some improvising on the piano: she heard distant voices and once the maid came in to carry away her tray. At eight-thirty a nurse brought two hot water bags which she slipped into the bed outside. She partly lowered the canvas curtains of the porch, and asked Edna if she wanted anything more. When she was gone, Edna pulled on her woolen cap, turned off her light, and with her letter in her hand, felt her way out onto the porch and into bed. All night the letter lay under her pillow, warm with the faint warmth of her fingers: but no glow returned from its burning words to her chilled heart —.

There came a day when Dr. Woolcot sought her again. It was late autumn, a rich hour of hot blue skies and cool air. "It is not a question, as I have told you, either of dying or of entirely recovering. It is a question of taking care of you. I know how to do that, and I am in a position now to do it here. I can buy in with old Dr. Peale. I've had some success with the bugs — will you let me try — Edna?"

They were driving up North Canon. She turned her face toward him. It was round, healthily colored, delicate, and sad.

"But you know —" she said.

"I know: but what of it? You won't marry him. Forget him for a moment. Could you marry me?"

She thought silently.

"Perhaps I still love him."

"Perhaps you do. But even so — what do you say to me?"

It was hard to answer him. — She lived here, alone, in

a boarding house, neither sick nor well. It was no particular hardship for her father to maintain her so in a simple way: still, there was his later flock of children. She had put love aside long, long ago: but this man, the most dependable, the most admirable man she had known, was asking her to marry him. He knew, he understood, he had weighed it all. The call for a home, for a sanction for herself, stirred within her. He said again, "What do you say?" and she answered him frankly, putting her hand in his—"I say, thank you. I say—yes." He circled her shoulders with his arm and they looked long into each other's eyes. His face was white, and hers was the wistful face of the girl who gives herself to marriage. "My God," he whispered, and pressed his vow in a kiss between her eyes.

At thirty, Edna, fresh colored and round, was still delicate in appearance. At forty, she had gained in weight, was well dressed, grey haired, and handsome. She managed a pleasant home on North Nevada Avenue, voted, went to church, curled her hair, and chose the records for the Victrola with some taste. She and the doctor had adopted two little girls left practically stranded by the death of a tubercular father and the re-marriage of the mother. They were twelve and sixteen now, charming girls. The doctor had prospered. Stout and bald, with absent, kindly puckered eyes, he thought of the girls and his wife almost as one person. He looked after their health, supplied their wants, was pleasantly enigmatical with all three.

One night at dinner he said to Edna, "Friend of yours in town."

"Of mine?"

"Douglas Carle, billed at the Burns, recital."

He grinned at her cheerfully.

"Tonight?"

"Tonight. I bought tickets."

Her heart sank.

"Who is he, mother? Mother —"

"Estella, *swallow* your food. He's a musician. He used to be my teacher."

"Oh, but, mother — Douglas *Carle*? He couldn't have been. He's wonderful." This was Verna, the elder.

"Why, mother! He lost his sweetheart when she was very young, she died, and he has never married, he's been true to her. Oh, mother — *may* I go to see him?"

"No, dear." Then to her husband, "I don't know — I hardly see — what would be the use?"

"He wouldn't see us, you know," smiled the doctor, rather amused at her color.

"N-no. Well, that's true. Perhaps we might."

They walked the few blocks to the theatre prosaically enough: but once inside, concealed in the darkened air and the many faces, her heart quickened. She wondered why she had come, she was almost in a panic — And then when he appeared on the stage, it was in his old fashion. Indolent, at his ease, there was a serious hurt look in the eyes with which he slowly swept the audience before sitting down to play. He was nearing fifty. The thick, reddish hair bore flecks of white. The body had grown a little heavier — very little — the face was almost unchanged. He played superbly, waiting with aloof courtesy until the applause left him free to go on.

At the end of his programme, his own composition was listed, his famous sonata, "Death in Youth," the piece indeed that had won him the ear of the critics, and later the public. The stage was darkened for this number, one circle of deep light falling across the red-gold hair of the artist. "Death in Youth." Vague and poignant, not for one alone — for all the young, stricken creatures of the universe, immortal pain, deathless longing, the very ache and potency of love throbbed in the music. The darkened theatre, the hushed, faint, fragrant air, the breathing of the people, the slow beating of their hearts, the memories, the phantoms, all the sweet, unearthly loves, the hopes,

the gifts, the dreams, the beauty that had gone, wooed at their hearts. Some saw through tears the faces of dead children: some the baby eyes of children grown and altered. Women faced forlornly the wraith of a lost self: men the long forsaken features of first love. The sweet eyes of motherhood reached the hearts of grown, indifferent sons. One man, hearing beside him the breathing of his wife, clothed her again in the garment of young beauty. *DEATH IN YOUTH.* The flotsam, the crusting of the years gave way. The purest love, the sweetest memory, the tenderest appeal for a moment had its way. It was an instant charmed from the flood of circumstance, a drop caught pure from the spring of life, one look at Love itself.

To Edna, wet-eyed against her husband's shoulder, Life paid its debt.

They walked home silently through the moonlit streets. "Well," said the doctor as they neared home, "what did you think of him?"

"He is unchanged."

"Yes. Beats all with those fellows! 'Death in Youth!' And he never even found out whether you lived or died."

"He couldn't, dear. It was his way of loving me always."

"So! You think him still in love with you?"

"He is still in love — with his dead sweetheart."

He gave her handsome arm a little shake. "And who is this?" he asked.

"Your wife."

"Really! All right. Suits me."

They turned amicably in toward their house: and Carle, strolling in the moonlight all unknowing some paces behind, watched them enter their comfortable door, and smiled at the moon, blowing fragrant smoke across his narrowed eyes.

"Married!" he thought. "Ye gods!" and strolled on, lost in his sonata, satisfied, bored, lonely, and rich.

PENITENCE

By OSCAR WILLIAMS

I shall go down some windy darkness of the brain
With naught about my shoulders but the folds of rain;
And all the words I uttered in the world where words
are said

Shall be beyond forgiveness in the twilight of the dead.
Ah, all the words I uttered shall murmur like a tree
Within a leafy loneliness in stark perplexity.
And in some dim wild sorrow my soul shall move alone
With only the vague crying of a something to atone;
I shall go down some windy darkness of the brain
And everywhere the silence shall be hung with rain;
An unknown shadow shall look strangely at the eyes that
sinned

And listen to those dark leaves lapping, lapping at the
wind.

MARCH

By L. F. MERRELL

March —
And a cool wind playing —
Rolling the snow-ball clouds
Over the sky-plains.

March —
And the sweeter-than-ever mating calls of robins.
And the tap-tap-tapping of sapsuckers.

March —
And the raking of lawns —
Burning of leaves —
The fire-dragon loosed on parkways
Devours the leaves, dry grass and weed stalks
Rapaciously —
His red fangs gleaming —
His blue breath streaming.

THE THUNDERBIRD

By HARTLEY B. ALEXANDER

I am the Thunder,
I am the Thunder, —
Sometimes I go
Pitying myself . . .
Sometimes in wonder
Grieving through the skies. . . .

Many Thunders are gone,
Many Thunders are flown
In the old days, —
Great Birds of Night,
Rain-laden Birds
With flame-blinking eyes. . . .

I am the Thunder,
I am the Thunder, —
Oft-times alone,
Oft-times in wonder
Pitying myself. . . .
Oft-times in fright
Of mine own sounding words,
Grieving through the night, —
I, the winged Thunder. . . .

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